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ABSTRACT

A study investigated whether the amount of "soft news" coverage for the three major American broadcast television networks increased during the period from 1972 to 1987. A total of 558 broadcasts were analyzed. Each news story was coded and placed into one of four categories concerning its timeliness and whether it was "hard" or "soft" news. Results indicated that while soft news was a small portion of the total newscast, there was a rising trend in the use of soft news by all three networks on average. Results also indicated that each network showed considerable variability in time devoted to soft news. Future research should be directed to audience behavior and uses and gratifications theory, and the comparison of national data with that of local affiliates. (Twenty-one notes, 2 figures, and 2 tables of data are included.) (RS)

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Hard News/Soft News Content of the National Broadcast Networks

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Hard News/Soft News Content of the National Broadcast Networks

Television news is the most pervasive source of information in western industrialized societies today.[1] News programs represent a large segment of total broadcast output for the three nationwide broadcast networks, ABC, NBC, and CBS. By the early 1980's, network television news programming in the United States totaled over 70 hours, or 21%, of regularly scheduled programming.[2] Considering this reliance, the content of television news takes on increased importance. One important issue regarding news content is the perceived shift towards soft news.

It's a popular notion that the three national broadcast networks have increasingly featured news stories that can be described as soft news, that is, news that really isn't news; instead, providing the viewing public with a diet of news stories of little consequence. It has been argued that the very definition of news has changed, moving away from the central concept of information people need to know, to a more elastic definition that includes all events that are out of the ordinary.[3] The economic pressures of earning rating points have made the practice of delivering the news a vehicle by which to insure profits, so instead of covering stories audiences need to know, the media serves up a diet of stories that titillate rather than inform.[4]

One conclusion is that media programmers use soft news as a revenue-enhancing strategy. This is possible because of an audience preferance for soft news along with an audience demand for news programs to provide entertainment. It appears that, at least in some cases, TV news producers have relied heavily on events that emphasize human interest elements more heavily than has been the practice in the past, and have skewed the content of newscasts toward a softer news mix. This indicates that gatekeeping is a two way process. In addition to editor bias, economic pressures can swing news gates open and closed because of anticipated preferences of the audience. In order to maximize profits, news broadcasts must satisfy advertisers by appealing to the largest numbers of persons possible.[5] Based on these considerations, it has been argued that the nature of news itself has changed.[6]

If this conclusion is correct, a number of theoretical perspectives may explain why audiences prefer soft news. Play theory describes the consumption of news as a voluntary act which is satisfying in and of itself.[7] Thus the consumption of soft news may be viewed as a vehicle by which such enjoyment is obtained. A gratification model also views the mass media and their audiences in psychological terms.[8] Based on this perspective, Rayburn, Palmgreen, and Acker concluded that audiences prefer soft news.[9]

Both play theory and the uses and gratifications model find support in Schramm who argues news consumption can be guided by pleasure motives, which have delayed rewards.[10] It is within this concept of pleasure that both the gratification model and play

theory overlap.

This study documents the shift in national network broadcast news content. Specifically, the amount of soft news produced and aired by the three national networks was measured in seconds per broadcast over a sixteen year period, from 1972 through 1987. Data from this study contributes to both play theory and the gratification model.

Much has been written about identifying the distinguishing characteristics of hard news and soft news. Whetmore indicated hard news is factually based while soft news is background information including opinion and color.[11] Smith suggested a definition of hard news that was based primarily on timeliness.[12] Carroll integrated content and temporal considerations as a determinant of hard news.[13] Carroll considered hard news stories that did not meet a 24-hour timeliness criterion to be a situational story.

But no attempt has previously been made to determine if a shift toward soft news in the content of the broadcast networks evening newscasts has occured. This study tests the hypothesis that there has been increased coverage of soft news for all three networks from 1972 to 1987.

Method

Two coders analyzed Vanderbilt Television News Abstracts for two one-week periods (March 1 through 7 and October 1 through 7) for each of the three nationwide broadcast news networks (ABC, CBS, and NBC) between 1972 and 1987 inclusive. A total of 558

broadcasts were coded. For the purposes of this study, hard news was defined:

Any story that focus on issues of ongoing policy consideration, factual accounting of current public events, or social issues and controversies that concern members of the audience is considered hard news.

Soft news was defined:

Any story that focuses on a human interest topic, feature, or non-policy issue is considered soft news.

As stated by Smith, the issue of timeliness may also be considered a dimension of hard news, and coders were instructed to code each story in terms of its timeliness.[14] A timely story was defined:

Any story that reports new information surrounding the story that has developed within the past 24 hours is considered timely.

Conversely, not timely was defined:

Any story that reports information or events that occurred more than 24 hours before its presentation is considered not timely.

Each news story coded, then, was placed into one of four categories: hard/timely, soft/timely, hard/not timely, or soft/not timely.

Category reliability was measured at +0.96 using Scott's pi, which takes into account the extent of intercoder agreement which may result from chance.[15]

To minimize the effects of unwarranted variability, a Spearman's rho correlation coefficient was used to test the

strength of the relationship between the amount of airtime devoted to soft news measured in seconds and observations over time measured in years.[16] Significance was tested using the two variables of interest, amount of soft news per broadcast over a period of years. In this study, the period observed produced 16 yearly aggregate observations (1971 through 1987) based on 558 newscasts.

Results

Table 1 shows average time devoted by each network, and an average of all networks, to soft news items in the sample

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Insert Table 1 about here

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period. The same data are represented in graphic form in Figure 1. The correlation coefficient was computed based on ranks of the data in Table 1 ($r = 0.79$, $p < 0.001$). We were

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Insert Figure 1 about here

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led to reject the null hypothesis.[17]

We conclude with a high degree of confidence that soft news content and the time period from 1972 to 1987 are not independent of each other. In fact a positive correlation indicates an increasing trend in news time devoted to soft news stories over the time period measured. We do not, however, predict a continuing rise for an indefinite period in soft news content on the three

network news programs.

Additional Results

The data can also be arranged in moving five year average form, which helps minimize drastic fluctuations in data from year to year. Figure 2 shows the results of such a smoothing technique on data gathered in this study. This

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Insert Figure 2 about here

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data also indicate the presence of a significant increase of soft news by the major networks.

Much of the data gathered in this study serves to describe the character of the nightly network newscasts. Table 2 shows summary averages of soft news time (in seconds) and number of soft news stories per broadcast by network. Over the 16 year period sampled, NBC aired more

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Insert Table 2 about here

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seconds of soft news per broadcast than the other two networks. NBC devoted over 10 seconds more per newscast to soft news items than ABC, and over 15 seconds more than CBS. In addition, NBC aired almost 0.9 soft news stories per broadcast, higher than both ABC and CBS averages.

Other findings help describe the character of network news. Analysis showed that 95.89% of all hard stories coded were also

timely in nature while only 74.56% of soft news stories were timely. All networks tended to place more soft news stories in the last third of all newscasts, accounting for 87.25%. Only 1.1% of all soft news stories were placed in the first third of newscasts, with the remaining 11.65% placed in the second third of all broadcasts.

Discussion

In strictly absolute terms, soft news is a small portion of the total newscast; even in 1985, in which the average amount of seconds of soft news per broadcast was at its highest, was around 2:20. Given a newshole of about 23 minutes, it could be argued that the amount of soft news per broadcast is small by comparison to coverage of hard news. But given the strength of the perceived shift in network news toward soft news, it was our purpose to determine whether or not these perceptions were accurate. In the early 70's, networks were devoting 60-70 seconds of the newshole to soft news. Compare that to 1985 figures. Framed in those terms, it should come as no surprise that the results were significant. We feel it is important to verify the perception of such a trend in an empirical, systematic manner.

Even though the data indicates a rising trend in the use of soft news by all three networks on average, each network shows considerable variability in time devoted to soft news from year to year as shown clearly in Chart 1. For example, from the years 1976 to 1985, ABC alternated between increasing and decreasing amounts of soft news coverage each year, with substantial jumps in 1981 and

1984. Other networks show the same elasticity.

Regardless of this elasticity, there still appears to be an incremental upward trend in the use of soft news. Ignoring the explosion of soft news coverage in the early 1980's, there is still a marked upward trend of soft news coverage. In the early 1970's average seconds per broadcast devoted to soft news for all three networks ranged from 59 to 73 seconds, compared to nearly 90 seconds in 1987.

What accounts for the rise in soft news? One arguable position suggests media programmers perceive an audience demand for soft news. If audiences do in fact demand soft news, then it seems understandable in a broadcast system driven by free market forces that programmers would strive to meet that demand. In attempting to attract and maintain large audiences, media programmers might attempt to make a portion of the news diet more palatable, more consumable, more human. This is consistant with play theory and the gratification model which explain audience behaviors as being driven by pleasure motives.

It appears that the accepted concept of what makes an event newsworthy has no direct connection with the media's journalistic responsibility to communicate the things that public needs to know. For example, it is possible to build a newscast that is newsworthy by definition with stories that emphasize human interest values.

Additional possibilities could explain the trend in the increased use of soft news. Both networks and local affiliates have come to rely on communication consultants to help their news

departments create programs that not only provide newsworthy programs, but also to win in the ratings battle as well.[18] The economic environment of the early 1980's in the broadcast industry also may have contributed to the rise of soft news stories, because soft news are generally less expensive to produce. They also give producers more flexibility in scheduling stories for air, because they can be used over a longer period of time. In other words, they have a long shelf life. Management upheavals at the three major networks also may have played a role in the change of news values.

Future Areas of Study

Other areas fruitful for analysis include discovering if there is an accompanying decrease in hard news items in each of the three networks. Presumably, since there has been an increase in time devoted to soft news items, it may have come at the expense of time devoted to hard news. Another fertile area is represented by comparing national data with local affiliates.[19] We might ask the question how has the trend made its impact on the local stations across the country, given Carroll's finding that local stations in smaller markets tend to favor soft news more than do larger market stations.[20]

Table 1
Average Soft News Time By Network
(time shown in seconds per broadcast)

Year	All Nets	ABC	CBS	NBC
1972	70.00	93.00	72.00	47.27
1973	71.94	26.00	79.00	107.27
1974	73.00	50.00	84.00	77.00
1975	63.44	55.46	43.00	91.82
1976	59.06	61.82	55.46	60.00
1977	99.03	86.00	65.00	132.73
1978	70.00	49.00	45.46	113.64
1979	88.33	94.55	66.92	105.83
1980	77.50	63.00	54.17	116.15
1981	111.03	150.83	96.15	90.71
1982	102.89	59.17	155.39	90.77
1983	124.86	103.33	138.46	131.67
1984	121.32	60.00	173.85	125.39
1985	140.79	172.31	115.00	133.08
1986	124.75	170.77	60.77	141.43
1987	89.21	109.73	55.83	100.0

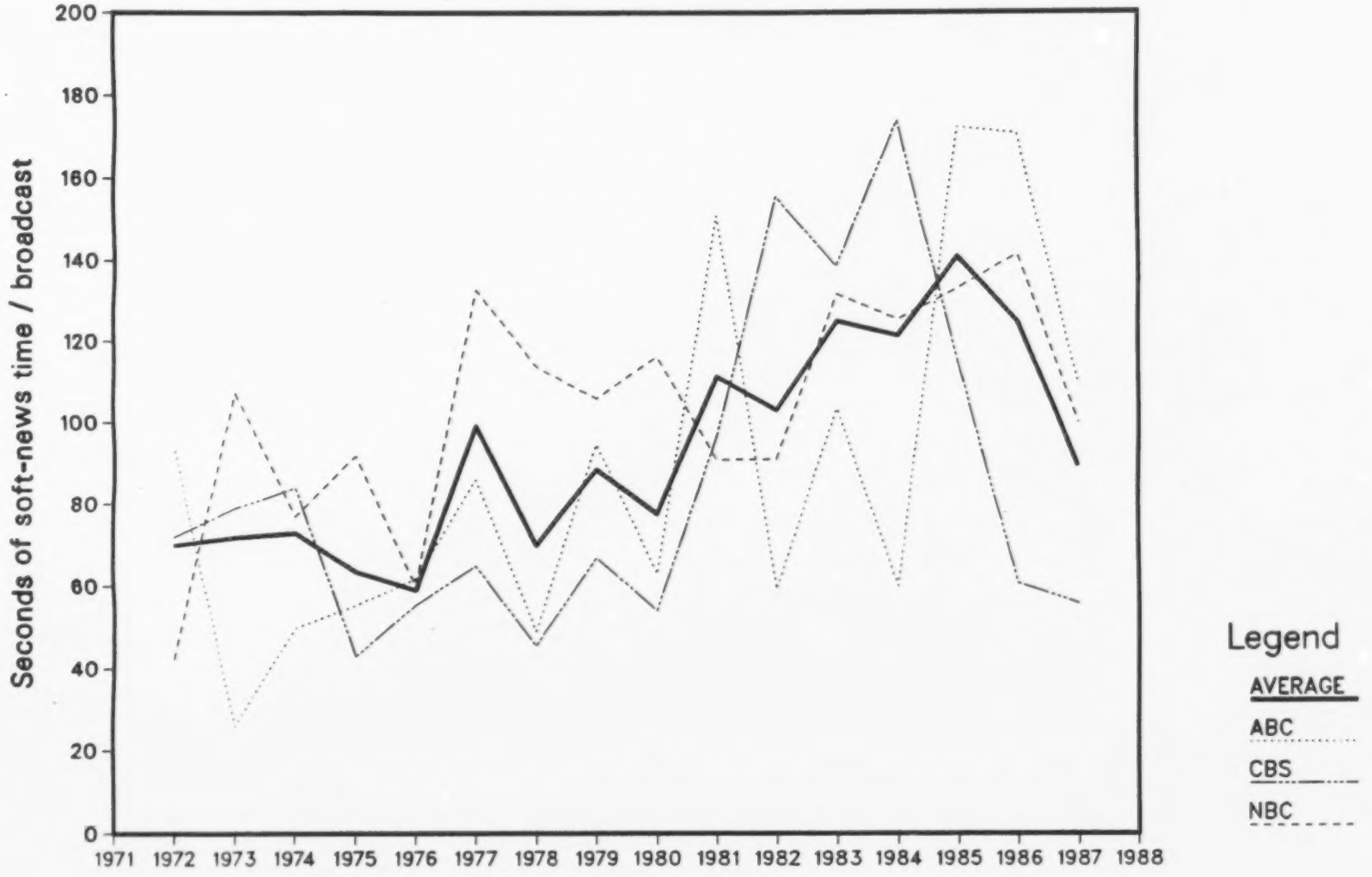
Table 2
Summary Averages of Network Soft News Per Broadcast

Network	Average soft news time (in seconds)	Number of soft news stories
ABC	91.33	0.678
CBS	87.26	0.774
NBC	102.91	0.896

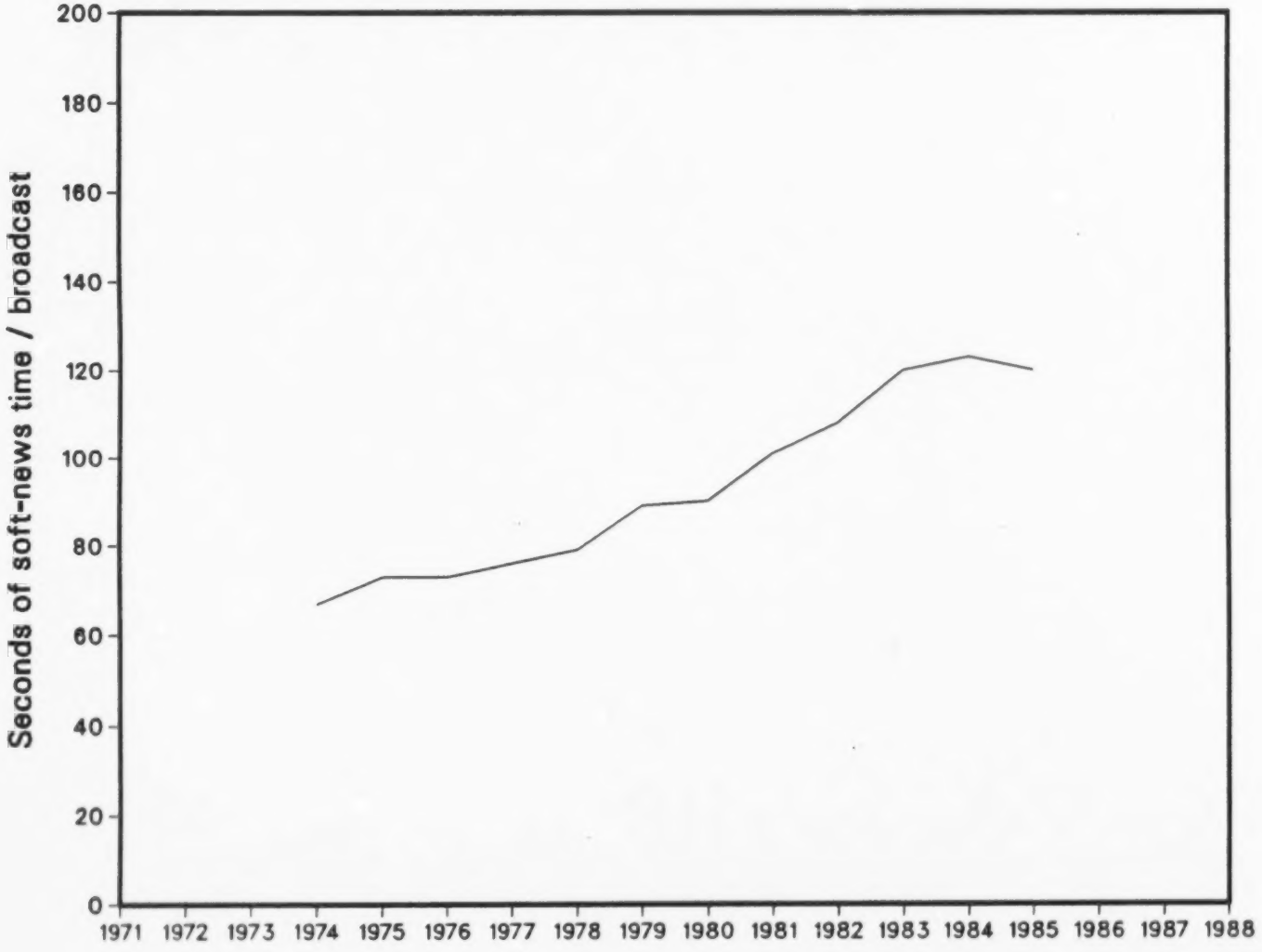
Figure 1
Average Soft News Time By Network

Figure 2
Moving Five Year Average of Soft News Time

SOFT-NEWS TIME BY NETWORK



FIVE-YEAR MOVING-AVERAGE OF SOFT-NEWS TIME



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[4] Ibid.

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[12] F. L. Smith, Perspectives on Radio and Television: Telecommunication in the United States (New York: Harper & Row, 1985), p. 204.

[13] R. L. Carroll, "Content Values in TV News Programs in Small and Large Markets," Journalism Quarterly, 62:877-938 (Winter 1985).

[14] Smith, ibid.

[15] W. A. Scott, "Reliability of Content Analysis: The Case of Nominal Scale Coding," Public Opinion Quarterly, 19:321-325 (Fall 1955). Scott's pi is computed as follows:

$$pi = \frac{\text{\% observed - \% expected agreement}}{\text{1 - \% expected agreement}}$$

$$= \frac{.98 - .5}{1 - .5} = \frac{.48}{.5} = 0.96$$

Based on this formula even if content units are assigned randomly, the two coders used in this study should agree on about 96% of the items. Determining an acceptable level of reliability is contextually bound to the particular study. In our assessment, 0.96 is an acceptable level of reliability.

[16] A box plot of the data revealed a number of outliers.

[17] Given that:

$$C = 1/4\ n(n + 1)2$$
$$= 16(17)2 / 4$$
$$= 1156$$

for n = 16 and = 0.005, T* ,n = 0.632
The correlation coefficient was computed as such:

$$rs = \frac{1424 - 1156}{[(1495.5 - 1156)\ (1496 - 1156)]\ 1/2} = 0.79$$

[18] D. Zizzo, "Competition Drives City TV Newscasts to Play Ratings Game," The Sunday Oklahoman, Dec. 25, 1988, p. 1, 25.

[19] See R. H. Gobetz, D. K. Scott, J. Jayroe, and L. L. Kaid, "A Comparison of Local Station and Network News Content." Unpublished reported prepared for presentation to the Southern Speech Communication Association Annual Convention, Tampa, Florida, April 1991.

[20] Ibid.